

Testimony of
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President and Chief Executive Officer
The Bender JCC of Greater Washington
Before the
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and
Emergency Management
Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
U.S House of Representatives
Thursday, March 16, 2017

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today, regarding FEMA's Nonprofit Security Grant Program.

My name is Michael Feinstein and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Bender JCC, located in Rockville, Maryland. We are a 501(c)(3), non-sectarian, community benefit agency, founded in 1913 and housed at our current location since 1969.

The Bender JCC is guided by our Jewish values to build a warm, inclusive, diverse and thriving community that welcomes everyone to participate in our programs - people of all backgrounds, faiths, ethnicities, abilities and sexual orientations. We serve a cross-section of the area's population from young mothers with infants to seniors who are 100 years old, or as we like to say, we serve everyone from babies to bobbies. Tens of thousands of people, representing over a half million visits through our doors each year, participate in cultural, educational, recreational, social and safety-net programs and services. We are open seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Our facilities are used in a variety of ways by individuals affiliated with the Bender JCC, other Jewish agencies, secular nonprofit organizations and government agencies. Several times a year we host large community gatherings attended by thousands people. Daily there are over 400 children in our preschool, afterschool and enrichment programs and in the summer over 500 children and 250 counselors participate in our inclusive day camp, with about 100 of those children having some type of disability. We provide arts and culture programs, lectures, fitness and aquatics classes and Jewish festivals and holiday celebrations to the broad community. We

help seniors age in place through a hot lunch and social program and a community-based Parkinson's Wellness Initiative, in partnership with Georgetown University Medical Center. And, we serve as a resource to the entire community, by providing meeting rooms and theatre space to hundreds of nonprofits in need of free or inexpensive program and performance space, and by serving as a public polling place for elections.

As a symbolic institution in the national capital region representing the highly-recognized "JCC" brand and serving the broad community, the Bender JCC faces a range of security threats. Past threats to our facility have included domestic disputes and protective orders, death and bomb threats against specific employees on campus, and a kidnapping threat against a JCC member.

We are directly affected by any and all incitement of violence against Jews and anti-Semitic rhetoric and actions locally, nationally, and abroad. In addition, acts of violence in our public schools have repercussions for how we view security at our facility.

Our 120,000 square foot building and outdoor recreational facilities sit on a 26 acre Jewish community campus in an increasingly urbanized area of Montgomery County, with easy access from public transportation and street traffic.

Immediately after 9/11, a comprehensive threat and security analysis identified a number of security vulnerabilities, deemed the JCC to be a high visibility profile target, and assessed the threat to our facility to be high. This assessment became reality several years ago when law enforcement alerted us to a credible threat against our institution after picking up chatter that targeted JCCs in our region. Following the shooting at the Kansas City JCC almost three years ago we undertook another security review which identified additional operational security vulnerabilities.

Today we face a new threat of terrorism against our institution as a result of the recent spate of bomb threats against JCCs and other Jewish institutions across the country. So far, we have been targeted twice – a phoned in bomb threat on January 9th that forced us to evacuate our building and an emailed bomb threat on March 6th that resulted in multiple sweeps of our building by staff

and police. As a result we are again evaluating what capital investments may be required to enhance our security against emerging threats.

FEMA's Nonprofit Security Grant Program has provided critical security resources to the Bender JCC. Based on the recommendations of multiple security analyses, we have used NSGP funding for critical capital investments to create layers of security through deterrence and hardening of our facility. NSGP-funded security enhancements have included fences, gates at our driveway entrance and exit, bollards, security cameras, bomb-proof trash cans, and a fully-integrated emergency communication system.

We believe that these and other security enhancements have provided a significant measure of protection for our members, guests and staff against lone wolves who scout vulnerable locations to attack. They offer protection against possible abduction or harm of children and the protection of JCC staff, members and the public and facilitate a quick response to threats.

The NSGP program is extremely important to the Bender JCC, particularly due to the heightened security threat to our Center. Because of this program, we have been able to upgrade our security primarily through target-hardening investments that we believe have strengthened our ability to proactively protect our community. We could not have afforded all of these security enhancements on our own and we have used the grant program to leverage other grant and private funding. As a result of recent threats, we believe it will be necessary for us to seek further NSGP funding in the next grant cycle.

The Bender JCC has had an extremely positive experience with the National Capital Region State Administrative Agency (DCHSEMA). They announce and roll out the program in a timely fashion, provide helpful briefings that explain the proposal items in detail, and are the "go to" people with any questions or clarification needed during the period of performance. They have been great stewards of the program, providing guidance to ensure the application process, oversight and compliance requirements, and project close-out were in order and satisfied.

We would be extremely concerned if the program were to be decentralized, with nonprofits competing with multiple state and local law enforcement, fire-fighters, port and transit security, and other emergency responders for FEMA preparedness grants. We believe that we would find ourselves at a severe competitive disadvantage against these larger entities, and would lose the level of attention and cooperation we currently have with the State Administrative Agency that has made our experience with the NSGP program successful.

Let me close by adding one additional concern for your consideration, pertaining to FEMA's oversight over the program. As with other grants administered by FEMA, the NSGP program recipients are required to secure an environmental and historic preservation certification from FEMA before they are permitted to draw-down grant funds. While we take no issue with respect to the certification requirement, we have experienced significant delays in receiving the clearance and the ability to draw-down funds. Given the nature of the program, and the inherent desire to put in place security enhancements expeditiously, we believe that the program would benefit from FEMA prioritizing the environmental and historic preservation certification process in order to alleviate the backlog in the approval process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions you may have.